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Request for the inclusion of an additional sub-item in the agenda of the seventy-third session

The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia

Letter dated 24 August 2018 from the Permanent Representative of Kyrgyzstan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In accordance with rule 15 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, I have the honour to request the inclusion, in the agenda of the seventy-third session, of an additional sub-item entitled "The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia" under agenda item 20, entitled "Sustainable development".

In accordance with rule 20 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, an explanatory memorandum in support of this request (see annex I) and a draft resolution (see annex II) are attached hereto.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annexes circulated as a document of the General Assembly.

(*Signed*) Mirgul **Moldoisaeva**
Permanent Representative of the
Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations

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Annex I

Explanatory memorandum

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the Central Asian region was the centre of uranium ore extraction and processing in the former Soviet Union, a situation that generated a significant accumulation of uranium production waste. In the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, preventive and emergency repair work at uranium production facilities was not done on a sufficient scale, owing to a lack of funding; as a result, most of those facilities were exposed to weathering processes, which have now become the cause of environmental problems in the region.

The uranium industry was under centralized State control. The flow of information on uranium production was strictly controlled from the top down by the relevant bodies of the Soviet Union's Ministry of Medium Machine-Building Industry. Companies were secure facilities, extraction companies did not keep archival information on extraction and processing technologies and there was no horizontal data-sharing among the different industrial plants.

All organizations in the sector applied identical regulatory standards (safety standards) to control irradiation and radioactive contamination at uranium ore extraction and processing sites, thereby reducing the administrative burden imposed. Radiation safety standards were comparable to similar standards in Europe and the United States of America in the 1960s and 1970s. A bonus system provided many incentives to enhance production indicators, however, insufficient attention was paid to environmental safety and health issues.

In order to address the problems caused by the legacy of industrial uranium extraction and processing practices in the Central Asian States, the historical features of the uranium industry's development in the region should be considered, as well as the prevailing conditions in the Central Asian Republics since their independence.

During the transition period, with its economic, political and social problems, the technical conditions for radioactive waste management deteriorated, which increased the risk of possible accidents. There is a real danger of pollution of the groundwater and rivers of the water basin throughout Central Asia, with major consequences not only for millions of people and the environment, but also for the whole sustainable development process in the countries of the region. It could take several decades and significant financial resources to mitigate the consequences of such accidents and disasters. At the present time the financial and technical capabilities are not sufficient to ensure the proper maintenance and remediation of radioactive and toxic storage facilities and the rehabilitation of contaminated areas.

In this connection, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic is making an active multilateral effort to prevent the radiation threat from uranium tailings ponds. Alerting the international community, financial institutions and development partners to the challenges associated with the uranium legacy in Central Asia has been the basis for the pooling of efforts with a view to reducing the risk to people and the environment of exposure to radioactive waste, strengthening the sustainable development of countries in the Central Asian region and mobilizing donor assistance from international organizations and private business.

In their speeches to the General Assembly in September 2010, 2012 and 2017, presidents of the Kyrgyz Republic repeatedly identified the problems related to the uranium legacy sites as among the priority issues to be solved. A special resolution on the problems of the uranium legacy in Central Asia, resolution 68/218, entitled "The role of the international community in averting the radiation threat in Central Asia", was adopted in 2013. This resolution enabled significant progress to be made

in the technical preparations for the remediation of the closed uranium mining sites and environmental impact studies to be carried out, including with regard to the establishment of specific financing mechanisms and structured dialogues with the local people of Central Asia directly involved in this matter.

In 2017, the Kyrgyz Republic launched an initiative to update resolution 68/218 in order to stress the importance of international solidarity, solve the aforementioned problems and contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the region.

A number of international high-level forums on the problem of uranium tailings in Central Asia were held at the initiative of the Kyrgyz Republic in April 2009 in Bishkek, in June 2009 in Geneva, in October 2012 in Bishkek and in May 2018 in Bishkek. At the forums, the need for a coordinated solution, including financing to address this acute regional problem, was stressed. In particular, participants from Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the United Nations, the European Union, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Eurasian Economic Community, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe supported joint declarations expressing the necessity for coordinated practical measures at the national, regional and international levels.

Significant progress has been achieved in that regard in recent years. In particular, environmental impact assessment studies have been conducted, and a specific financing tool, an EBRD fund, has been established in order to accumulate financial resources effectively. Moreover, close cooperation with IAEA has led to the development of a strategic master plan for the remediation of uranium legacy facilities in Central Asia, in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as national development strategies.

Clearly, only under the condition of targeted and coordinated assistance from the international community will it be possible to solve the set of problems of uranium legacy in the region. The Kyrgyz Republic hopes that, as a result of the increased attention to, and interest in, these issues on the part of the United Nations, IAEA and the international community, the environmental risk at the national and regional levels and the risk of a humanitarian crisis will be prevented, the sustainable development of the countries of the Central Asian region will be promoted and the risk of the utilization of radioactive waste for extremism and terrorism will be eliminated.

On the basis of the aforementioned developments, the Kyrgyz Republic has prepared a draft update of General Assembly resolution 68/218, entitled "The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia".

Annex II

Draft resolution

The role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia

The General Assembly,

Reaffirming its resolution 68/218 of 20 December 2013,

Taking into account the outcome of the high-level international forum entitled "Uranium Tailings in Central Asia: Local Problems, Regional Consequences, Global Solutions", held in Geneva on 29 June 2009,

Taking into account also the outcome of the international conference entitled "Uranium Tailings in Central Asia: Joint Efforts in Risk Reduction", held in Bishkek on 24 and 25 October 2012,

Taking into account further the outcome of the international conference entitled "Uranium tailings in Central Asia: Problems and Solutions", held in Dushanbe from 20 to 22 November 2012,

Taking into account the outcome of the shared high-level events, initiated by the Kyrgyz Republic on the margins of the General Assembly sessions, dedicated to the dangers associated with the former uranium mining activities in Central Asia, held in New York on 20 September 2017,

Taking into account also the ongoing efforts of Central Asian States towards the rehabilitation of former uranium facilities in Central Asia,

Taking into account further the role of the international donor community in providing support to the Central Asian States for addressing these problems at the bilateral and multilateral levels,

Taking into account the necessity for a strategic and coordinated approach in the preparation and implementation of programmes, with a view to solving the problems associated with uranium tailings in Central Asia,

Taking into account also the efforts towards the remediation of uranium tailings in Central Asia and the implementation of projects carried out through the international target programme of the Commonwealth of Independent States, entitled "Remediation of the territories of States affected by uranium mining industries" and projects of the European Commission on conducting an integrated environmental impact assessment and feasibility study for the environmental remediation of the uranium legacy sites of Min-Kush and Shekaftar, Kyrgyzstan, and Degmay and Taboshar, Tajikistan, as well as promising projects planned to be implemented within the framework of the environmental remediation account of uranium legacy sites production,

Noting the importance of the strategic master plan for environmental rehabilitation at the sites of former uranium facilities in Central Asia, developed by the Coordination Group for Uranium Legacy Sites of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and approved by the competent authorities of the Governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2017,

Noting also that the competent authorities of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the Secretariat of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the European Commission and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which signed the foreword to the strategic master plan on 19 September 2017, will support

and promote a coordinated approach to remediation with a view to achieving sustainable and safe results of these activities in Central Asia,

Noting further that many tailings ponds are located in seismically active areas close to population centres and the banks of major rivers in the region and are subject to the threat of natural disasters,

Reaffirming the human rights to life, to an adequate standard of living and to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and stressing in this regard the need to mitigate the impact of natural and man-made disasters in the areas around uranium waste burial sites and tailings ponds in order to avoid loss of human life, as well as immediate and long-term negative consequences for human health,

Noting the need to inform the public in a timely manner when conducting work on the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia,

Considering that, despite the renewed efforts made by the States of Central Asia at the national level and despite the continued support of international programmes and projects to remediate former uranium mines and tailings ponds, a number of States continue to have serious social, economic and environmental problems associated with former uranium mines and tailings ponds,

Striving to contribute to strengthening the security and safety of radioactive materials,

Expressing gratitude to donor countries, in particular Czechia, Finland, Germany, Japan, Norway, the Russian Federation, Switzerland and the United States of America, and to international and regional organizations and financial institutions, including the United Nations Development Programme, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Global Environment Facility, the World Bank and others, which provided and are providing assistance in addressing the problems of uranium tailings in the Central Asian region,

Stressing the need for a coordinated approach in the rehabilitation of former uranium production facilities, particularly in Central Asia, and welcoming the multilateral initiatives undertaken by the international community to pool resources and identify ways of providing assistance to address the problems associated with uranium tailings ponds in the Central Asian region,

Stressing also the importance of regional cooperation for successful implementation of environmental rehabilitation in Central Asia in order, inter alia, to increase competence, exchange information and use best practices and lessons learned in the management of radioactively contaminated areas in Central Asia and other regions, including through relevant training programmes, and to use the experience gained, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme, in addressing the human factor involved in preparedness for accidents and emergency situations on sites of uranium legacy with potential transboundary effects and in recovering from them,

Taking into account that the Governments and populations of the States of Central Asia are aware of the threat of possible natural or man-made disasters and their global consequences for the lives and the health of a large number of people and for the environment,

Taking into account also the rationale of periodically amending the resolution entitled "The role of the international community in averting the radiation threat in Central Asia", with a view to updating it,

1. *Notes* the importance of remediating areas affected by former uranium extraction plants;

2. *Recognizes* the need to devise and promote effective programmes and projects for the responsible and safe management of radioactive and toxic waste in Central Asia;

3. *Also recognizes* the continuing role of the international community in the prevention of the radiation threat in Central Asia, and emphasizes the importance of adopting preventive and other measures to resolve the problem of radioactive and toxic waste and to remediate the polluted areas in accordance with the highest safety standards and best global practices;

4. *Notes* the recent initiatives taken to strengthen the preparation and implementation of rehabilitation programmes on the basis of the identification of priority areas;

5. *Calls again upon* the international community to assist the States of Central Asia in resolving the problems of uranium tailings ponds, and emphasizes the importance of regional cooperation in the following priority areas: improvement of the legislative framework in accordance with international standards; management and maintenance at safe levels of uranium and other radioactive and toxic tailings; remediation of tailings ponds and development and implementation of special programmes and projects to improve the monitoring of its safety; raising public awareness; adoption of measures to prevent people from gaining access to polluted materials; and implementation of socioeconomic, health and humanitarian measures to enhance the quality and standard of living of the population in regions where tailings ponds are located;

6. *Notes*:

(a) The importance of the strategic master plan, developed by the Coordination Group for Uranium Legacy Sites of the International Atomic Energy Agency and approved by the States of Central Asia, designed to harmonize projects and demonstrate to the international community the availability of a reliable and jointly developed approach to the implementation of rehabilitation programmes in all the Central Asian countries and recent initiatives taken to strengthen preparation and implementation of such programmes on the basis of identified priority areas;

(b) The practical implementation, begun in 2013, of the international target programme of the Commonwealth of Independent States, entitled "Remediation of the territories of States affected by uranium mining industries", which is an integral part of the strategic master plan;

(c) The need to develop strategies in order to inform the public and other stakeholders of rehabilitation programmes in all States of Central Asia;

7. *Expresses support* for the efforts made by the States of Central Asia in devising and implementing their country programmes, including in mobilizing domestic resources, and encourages the States of the region to hold further bilateral and multilateral negotiations, in accordance with the adopted strategic approach, to avert the radiation threat in Central Asia.